

Russia anticipates new COVID surge, even as deaths remain at record highs

Andrea Peters
14 December 2021

Russia continues to experience extremely high daily COVID-19 infections, as the spread of the Omicron variant threatens the country with yet another surge. While new cases have declined over the last week by about 7.3 percent and are currently hovering around 29,000 a day, they have yet to fall below previous highs seen in February 2021.

On Tuesday, the country added another 1,176 officially recorded COVID-19 deaths, bringing the total number of those who have perished from the disease to over 289,000. According to the federal statistical agency Rosstat, whose data includes COVID-19 fatalities otherwise attributed to individuals' co-morbidities, as of October of this year 537,000 Russians had lost their lives from the coronavirus.

Schools across the country continue to shutter their doors due to infections and exposures. In the city of Yekaterinburg, 350 classrooms in K-12 schools and kindergartens are in quarantine. In Nizhegorodsky Oblast, over 1,000 have also been closed or switched to online learning. The head of that region's ministry of health recently told the press that he expects another COVID-19 wave to hit the area in mid-January, with infections driven by illness among children. In the Siberian city of Yakutsk, cases among those under 18 are rising. Two hundred forty tons of oxygen were just delivered to the city by riverboat with the aid of an icebreaker.

Speaking at a meeting of cabinet ministers on Wednesday, Russia's Vice Premier Tatyana Golikova indicated that the government anticipates further spread of COVID-19 as the Omicron variant penetrates Russia. She warned that each individual infected with the new form of the disease generally passes it along to three others, a four-fold increase over the Delta variant. This will result in increasing pressure on the country's healthcare system, Golikova noted. It has already been buckling under the weight of the current surge.

Despite declaring that the Kremlin is preparing a plan to handle the forthcoming situation, she released no details as to what it intends to do. Instead, Golikova appealed to regional authorities to "strengthen" their efforts and prepare for the imposition of restrictions on mass gatherings and in public places, as well as the extension of the school winter holidays. For some time now, the Kremlin has largely rolled back all COVID-19 mandates coming from the central government and dumped the problem on local health ministries, resulting in a hodge-podge of measures from one place to the next.

The day before Golikova spoke, the head of the Russian parliament declared that lawmakers were abandoning efforts to pass federal legislation that would have required people to show a QR code proving either vaccination or prior infection in order to use many forms of public transportation. Simultaneously, Moscow mayor Sergei Sobyenin announced that the city—where the majority of COVID-19 cases is concentrated—was unilaterally extending the length of time that QR codes given to individuals due to their having already gotten COVID-19 would be valid. It is increasing from 6 to 12 months.

All of this is happening as the danger from Omicron is rapidly becoming apparent. Sobyenin's declaration came alongside news that among the 16 individuals in Russia so far determined to have the Omicron variant, 7 had already had the disease and 11 were fully vaccinated, including one person who fell in both categories. Similar data are emerging from other studies internationally.

Clearly alarmed by the growing evidence that those with COVID-19 antibodies do not have significant protection from Omicron, makers of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine declared this week that they are working to modify the shot to boost the immune response it provokes against the new variant. Currently less than 50 percent of the country's population is fully vaccinated. While vaccine uptake has been rising, at the current rate it would take

many months to achieve adequate population-wide protection and a recent study by the Levada Center, a Russian polling agency, found that 36 percent of respondents said they had no intention of ever getting vaccinated and 53 percent oppose obligatory inoculation.

The skepticism, even outright hostility, towards vaccination for COVID-19 within the Russian population is evident. It reflects deep distrust towards a government that has for decades presided over a massive growth in social inequality, a process that has only accelerated during the pandemic with efforts made to help ordinary people withstand COVID-19's economic impact that can, at best, be described as pathetic. At the same time, the downplaying of the dangers of the disease by the authorities and the promotion of anti-scientific outlooks has contributed to a situation in which 53 percent of Russians, according to the Levada Center, say they are unafraid of infection.

In a deranged expression of social frustrations provoked by the pandemic and the government's response, last week, a 45-year-old lieutenant colonel in the Russian army, shot up a government office in Moscow after a confrontation with a security guard over masking. Two people died and another three were injured, including a 10-year old girl who went to the hospital in critical condition.

A December 8 guest essay in the *New York Times* by Alexei Kovalev, an editor at one of Russia's leading liberal news outlets, gleefully declared that COVID-19 is "beating Putin." One almost gets the sense that these layers revel in the social destruction wrought. What is conspicuously left out of Kovalev's commentary, however, is the glaring fact that disastrous policies of the Putin government are identical to those pursued by virtually every other government on the planet—above all, the United States.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact